

DEATH ON THE CROSS: THE RITUAL OF REGENERATION



DANSA DE LA MORT (DANCE OF DEATH) OF VERGES

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IN A NUMBER OF TOWNS THROUGHOUT THE PAÏSOS CATALANS, DRAMATIC CELEBRATIONS OF VERY ANCIENT ORIGIN ARE STILL HELD DURING HOLY WEEK, THE BEST-KNOWN OF WHICH IS THE “TRAGÈDIA DE LA PASSIÓ”, THE CROWN OF MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN DRAMA.

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In the cultures of the ancient world, one of the most expressive indications of the advance of civilization was the gradual substitution in their religions' public ceremonies of animal in place of human sacrifices and, in an even less bloody stage, the use of plant or symbolic offerings. In this respect, Christianity arrived early on at a rationalization of the sacrifice, codified in the ceremony of the mass, which, in the words of Jean Genet, is “the most perfect drama of the western world: in the hope of a crust of bread, the priest devours God. Theatri-

cally I know of nothing more effective than the elevation.” The effectiveness lies in abstraction. Faith and reason, hand in hand, put an end to blood-letting in the ritual scene (quite another thing are the unbridled fanaticisms which have, from time to time and generally at the service of political interests, appeared in the history of Christianity: from anticultural and iconoclast barbarity to the Fascist crusade, taking in the extermination of Arabs, Jews or American Indians under the tyranny of men of state that are now proposed for beatification).

The tendency towards naturalism in late medieval Europe was to encourage the cultivation of theatrical forms that made the essence of the story evoked in the mass—the exemplary sacrifice of the divine hero, Christ, a reminder of the agricultural gods of fertility who have to die to be reborn, whose blood is spilled in spring so that the vital liquid may make the earth germinate—more accessible to reason and to the understanding of the people.

Thus, the Tragèdia de la Passió, “the essential work of Catalan drama”, as J. S. Pons writes, becomes the crowning



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example of medieval European drama, and it is precisely the Catalan language that has perpetuated most textual versions (from the fourteenth century to the present day) and the greatest number of stage versions. The first references we have speak of large-scale performances in the streets and town squares (Pollença, Vila-Real, Castelló, Perpinyà), which during the fifteenth century were staged in the temples (Tarragona, Lleida, Cervera, Ciutat de Mallorca), to return to the open air after the Council of Trent, or else preserving only the most liturgically significant

and least rowdy episodes (the Last Supper, the Descent from the Cross, the Visit to the Sepulchre) in the sacred enclosure and, naturally, reducing the theatrical elements to a minimum, retrieving the holy words of the Latin and of the religious singing or suppressing the dialogues. One of the most remarkable cases was the Descent from the Cross in the Cathedral of Mallorca, which maintained intact an original fifteenth century scenic arrangement and text until, prohibited in 1691, it was entirely rewritten, in Latin, with a drastic suppression of characters and scenic

components, to give a new version that was to spread throughout the Balearic Isles. One of the latest, most impressive remnants is the ceremony of Pollença, a mimed version of the Descent—with the use of an articulated Christ—, accompanied by the singing of the *Miserere* and culminating in the torchlight procession of the Burial, which follows the 365 steps from the Calvary shrine to the parish church.

A devout Descent from the Cross was also performed in Catalan at Ulldecona until at least the eighteenth century, a tradition now sullied by the recent implantation of a Castilian-language Passion Play of little interest.

The lay Passion Plays—that is to say, those unconnected with the mass—were more fortunate and have preserved the local language and the scenic tradition, the most faithful taking the whole town as their stage (Verges, Sant Hilari, Sant Vicenç dels Horts, Mieres), with all the inhabitants taking part in the event. The most developed (Esparreguera, Olesa, Palau d'Anglesola) have not hesitated to incorporate Hollywood-inspired scenographic techniques or new models of acting, taking refuge in the inevitably more agreeable interior of large theatres.

All of them cultivate a fertile tradition and germinate outstanding artists such as Lluís Llach and Anna Lizaran; all of them arouse the interest of a wide range of sectors: from the general public (who turn out *en masse* for the performances) to the most remote research (such as the Institute of Buddhist Culture of the University of Ryukoku in Japan).

Each Holy Week, many towns in the Països Catalans hold theatrical events whose function is still the collective expression of the need for the annual reaffirmation of a community's social links through the celebration. ■